

U.S. lashes out at Iraq again

SMSU faculty, students share thoughts on the Middle East

by Mark R. Fletcher
News Writer



Americans who thought U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf was over were probably a little surprised by the news of recent U.S. missile strikes against Iraq.

"It really surprised me, coming out of the blue like that. They really didn't say anything about it," said Danny Weydert, an SMSU freshman.

Weydert was recently discharged from the Navy following service aboard the U.S.S. Vandergrift, a guided missile frigate, in the Persian Gulf. The Vandergrift was enforcing the U.N. embargo against Iraq.

The missile strikes were in response to the Iraqi intrusion into the Kurdish "safe haven" established in northern Iraq as a refuge for Kurds fleeing Saddam Hussein's army after the Gulf War.

The safe haven effectively partitioned off the Kurdish area from the rest of Iraq, allowing the Kurds to establish some limited civil government. When a civil war began

among the various Kurdish groups, Iran and Iraq began supporting the opposing factions.

Iran and Iraq fought a nine year war with each other during the 1980s, and the Kurdish strife has been used as an extension of that conflict.

"They're using the Kurds as a way to get at each other," said Ahmed Ibrahim, professor of Middle Eastern history at SMSU.

Hussein sent troops into the U.N. safe haven in support of one of the Kurdish factions. After he ignored warnings to withdraw from the safe haven, the United States responded with cruise missile strikes.

The missile strikes, however, were not aimed at the north, where the Kurds and Iraqi troops are. The strikes are targeted at air-defense and communication installations in the south to allow the southern no-fly

zone to be extended further north until it reached the outskirts of Baghdad.

The timing of the strikes during an election year caused some to wonder if it wasn't just politics.

"I don't think it had anything to do with the election," Ibrahim said. "Bill Clinton is way ahead in the polls. He doesn't need this to boost his numbers."

Rather than Clinton timing the strike to the election year, Dr. Merhdad Haghayeghi, professor of Middle Eastern politics and government at SMSU, suggests perhaps it was Hussein who timed it to the elections.

"I don't think Bill Clinton operates in that fashion," Haghayeghi said. "I believe what we're seeing is Saddam Hussein taking advantage of an election year to test the

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resolve of the administration."

American policy toward the region is criticized for applying a double standard regarding treatment of the Kurds.

"If we're punishing Iraq for mistreating the Kurds, why aren't we also punishing Turkey for doing the same thing?" Yusuf Patton, acting president of the Muslim Student Association, asked.

Patton and others in the Muslim Student Association feel the actions against Hussein are hurting the wrong group.

"We agree Saddam Hussein is a dictator," Patton said. "However, the Iraqi people shouldn't be used to punish Hussein. The sanctions are only hurting the average Iraqi citizen."

Many in the Middle East believe America has taken over the role the British played in the 19th and early 20th century when large areas of the

Middle East, including Iraq, were once under British colonial authority.

"There's a sense that the United States is doing the same thing the British did in the 19th century," Ibrahim said. "They are there to divide and rule. The recent action in Iraq shows that the United States could do any-

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Dr. Merhdad Haghayeghi

thing it wanted without necessarily consulting with anybody."

Despite the suspicion of American intentions and purposes, there is also a positive side to Middle Eastern attitudes toward the United States.

"There is also a sense that Americans are really honest brokers of

peace and tranquility in the region and should be given a chance to show it," Ibrahim said.

While the missile strikes may be effective in convincing Hussein to pull away from the safe haven, the strikes will probably not affect Hussein's hold on power.

"Obviously Saddam Hussein eventually would have to come to his senses and find ways to compromise, but I don't think he'll be dictated to," Ibrahim said. "He's Saddam Hussein, he's a survivor and he's going to be around for awhile."

This will probably not be the last time Iraq creates problems for the United States.

"As long as Hussein is alive, or in power, we'll have problems with Iraq," Haghayeghi said.

As for changes in Arab-American relations, Dr. Haghayeghi doesn't expect major changes.